Mari. *By Chanel Jackson*

Mari, age thirty-one, sat on her carpeted bedroom floor, hair still dripping from her shower, her skin smelling like fresh fruit. An oversized towel was wrapped around her, covering her naked body. The carpet beneath her was dirty, the kind of dirty a depressed young woman collects after squeezing the contents of her once-carefully curated one-bedroom apartment into her now father's upstairs spare bedroom.

It was the kind of dirty where if you shared your bedroom space with a cat like Mari did, and the litter box was next to your closet like her cat's tinkers was because your dad hated cats. The kind of dirty where, if you sat down while wet and then stood up, little particles clung to your skin.

Mari stared at her damp hair in her small table side mirror. When dry, her curls barely grazed her shoulders, but when straightened or pulled, they reached below her breasts. She liked her hair enough she had gone thought all the trends with her hair when she was younger, and she only ever cut it when it was damaged, whether from straightening it constantly as a kid or bleaching it in her twenties.She had finally gotten to a point where her hair was healthy and long, the years of she self care hair routine had paid off well.

Yet here she was, holding scissors, looking at her reflection. All the reasons not to cut her hair flooded her mind. But before she could think twice, she grabbed a piece, pressed the scissors close to her scalp, and snipped. Then another. And another. Some chunks larger than others, until eventually nothing was left.

She hadn't planned any of it. It was just a thought while she was in the shower… a sudden rage at realizing she didn't even know what the shape of her own head looked like. She knew the rest of her body intimately, she spent years examining—every mole, stretch mark, scar. But her head? Hidden, for some reason this bothered Mari.

Now, staring in the mirror, flecks of lint and cat hair clinging to her damp skin and her newly shaved head exposed, she felt tears forming. She

was surprised, they hadn’t shown up while she was cutting it. It hadn’t felt like a breakdown. She knew what those felt like.

Mari was good at crying, too good. Good enough to control it. She only cried when she decided the situation earned her tears.

She thought for a second.

Then she let them fall.

This moment earned them.

Mari tried to control everything when it came to herself her reactions, her emotions, even the thoughts she allowed herself to think. She clung to that control because everything else in her life had slipped through her fingers. She had lost her job, her apartment, and her car, and ended up moving back into her dad’s house all in the same year.

So when she felt like she couldn’t control the world around her, she held onto the one thing she still could:

Herself.

Mari heard her father in the other room, yelling into the phone at his bank. He had that loud-talking habit older people get were volume equals importance. Probably losing hearing in his left ear, too.

Mari’s Dad was complicated, living with him as adult was sure diffrenet from living with him as a child. Growing up Mari saw her father as Superman, he was the “fun” parent whenever he was around. And as Mari got older like most children do, her father lost this superhero title. The sad but true realization that superhero aren’t real no longer broke Mari’s heart, she now saw the Clark Kent— the man behind the cape.

Her father now divorced from her mother, was and still is to this day a self proclaimed lady's man which, he would proudly tell people this himself, as he was now taking advantage of his freedom, dating all sorts of people, trying to fill the hole where Mari's mother once resided.

Mari had accepted who her father was and choose to love him either way, just from a distance she realized she could not fill the hole her father was desperately trying to replace. He had to do that for himself. She had let go of the responsibly of her father and feeling indebted to him for allowing her to stay in his house made her feel all the more guilty of doing so.

Upon hearing her fathers voice Mari quickly snapped out of it her tears now dried up, and whatever feeling she had felt in that moment turned instantly to worry. Her father loved her natural hair. Everyone did. Hair was a big theme in her family—like in many Black families. If you could grow your hair past your shoulders, you had "good hair," and if you had good hair, you kept it. And Mari had just chopped hers off out of curiosity… *and* maybe a touch of impulsivity.

The worry brought urgency with it, a pattern she knew well. When she worried, she had to act. Had to move. Had to fix something immediately. She jumped up, forgetting she was only in a towel, and took two big steps to her closet.

"I know it's somewhere under all this shit," she muttered, digging through the pile of stuff on the closet floor.

"Ah—here it is."

Her wig. Mostly matted, but curly enough that it didn't matter. She stepped over the pile of things that was living in her closet and now lived in the middle of her room, and secured the wig to her head— the worry eased, and Mari felt better Another pattern she recognized.

Mari got dressed, did her makeup, and finally felt ready to leave the room.

Her father wouldn't be surprised she was wearing a wig she did that often. But he preferred her natural hair, so when it was hidden, he always made those types of comments; nice enough to avoid argument, shady enough to sting.

He heard her door.

"Mari, that you?"

"Yeah. Good morning, Dad," she said, checking herself once more in the bathroom mirror to ensure "BALD" wasn't stamped across her forehead.

Her father stepped out of his office as she headed toward the stairs.

"Where are you going with your fro wig on?" he asked.

Mari smiled, though she hated that she smiled. It wasn't what she felt, just the reaction she'd learned to put on.

"I'm grabbing some coffee, then heading to the library to study."

Mari was a college student, mostly because she didn't know what else to do with her life. College was a solution that muted her spiraling thoughts

for a while, and it was a convenient answer whenever her father asked about her plans.

“Okay, honey. Have fun. Love you,” he said.

“Love you too,” she replied, heading downstairs quickly to avoid further conversation. She felt like a failure hiding a bald head underneath a wig.

Her head itched the entire drive to the library. Without her natural hair as padding, the wig pressed uncomfortably into her scalp. Mari hated feeling uncomfortable in her own skin, which was often, when it got really bad she had this feeling of wanting to rip parts of her body off. It was a strange sensation that was hard to explain to others, so when she finally sat down and opened her laptop, she couldn’t focus on her homework. The itch grew louder and louder until she snapped.

Mari left her laptop and books spread across the table and rushed into the bathroom. She stood in front of the mirror and ripped the wig off, revealing the uneven, impulsive haircut beneath.

Then she heard the toilet flush.

She froze.

An older woman walked out, glanced at the wig in Mari’s hand, then at Mari’s bare head.

“Bad day?” the woman asked, washing her hands.

Mari stayed silent.

“Or a good day,” the woman added, smiling. “Depending on how you look at it.”

Mari didn’t understand what the women meant and she didn’t speak up to ask she felt embarrassed being seen in a sate of utter vulnerability, she stood there silent, waiting until the stranger walked out, Once the coast was clear Mari let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding.

Mari turned back to the mirror. Finally feeling safe enough to look again, and there on the side of her head she saw something she’d never seen before. A small, heart-shaped birthmark hidden all her life beneath her “good hair.”

In this mirror, bigger than the one at home, she saw everything, the missed patches, the uneven lines, the tiny freckles now exposed where her sideburns once were… and the heart.

Mari tended to look for reasoning in moments after making rash decisions to decide wether or not she should regret her choices. This allowed Mari to have many great epiphany now, What had once felt like a breakdown, now felt like a breakthrough.

she realized something she had been avoiding for awhile, and the birthmark was just the beginning as her eyes started to swell. She wondered if this moment deserved her tears.

Before she could decide, they fell anyway.

And as the tears slid down her face unmanaged and unchosen, Mari didn’t stop them she didn’t want to.

Mari’s father was a reflection of Mari’s same need but shaped differently. The need to fill the empty spaces inside herself by gripping tightly to anything solid. She hadn’t seen it before but, she understood now that controlling herself was never going to make her whole, letting go was.

That was the moment, Mari decided she had a life to live and, it was worth living.

The end.